

COMMITTEE ON ORDINANCES, CHARTER & RULES
MONDAY, MARCH 13, 2023, AT 6:10 p.m.
COMMITTEE ROOM
WOBURN CITY HALL

Voting members present: Chairman Joseph Demers, Councilor Darlene Mercer-Bruen, Councilor Lou DiMambro, Councilor Richard Gately, and Councilor Robert Ferullo

Non-voting members present: President Michael Concannon, Councilor Charles Viola, and Councilor Jeffrey Dillon. Absent: Councilor Joanne Campbell

Also present: Police Chief Robert Rufo, Police Capt. John Murphy, and License Commission Chairman Thomas Skeffington

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Reading and approval of previous meeting minutes: Motion made by Councilor Ferullo and seconded by Councilor DiMambro to approve the minutes of the meeting of January 30, 2023; approved, 5-0.

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Order to amend WMC Title 5, Businesses and Regulations, Article XIV Innkeepers:

Motion made by Councilor DiMambro and seconded by Councilor Ferullo to allow members of the audience to address the committee; approved, 5-0. Chairman Skeffington said he is here on behalf of the License Commission. He said the commission feels the proposed ordinance change is much needed. He said several members of the council, including Councilor Mercer-Bruen, Councilor Viola, Councilor Dillon, Councilor Ferullo, and Councilor DiMambro have attended past meetings of the License Commission that have involved disciplinary action or inquiries into activities at the city's hotels. He said the number of calls to police from the local hotels has been astronomical. He said Capt. Murphy sent the commission a log of calls from the hotels to police from January 1, 2022 to July 13, 2022. Chairman Skeffington said there were more than 50 calls from the Red Roof Inn, which he said were addressed after a recent change of ownership. He said there were 52 calls from the Extended Stay hotel during the period. Chairman Skeffington read the rest of the list as follows: Crowne Plaza – 48 calls; Hilton – 25 calls; Best Western – 20 calls; Comfort Inn – 12 calls; Fairfield Inn – 12 calls; Marriott 700 Unicorn Park Drive – 12 calls; Holiday Inn – 11 calls; Marriott 300 Presidential Way – 7 calls; Sonesta – 3 calls; Hampton Inn/Homewood Suites – 1 call. He said there are instances when police are going in blind when they respond to these calls. He said they have no idea what they're getting into. He said the License Commission had a meeting with the new director of security from Extended Stay. He said the new director seems to be on board with what the commission is trying to accomplish. She said there has been mostly lip service from Extended Stay for the past couple of years but now they seem more sincere. He said the License Commission tried to initiate a fine schedule, but after talking with the City Solicitor it was decided the best way to go is to amend the ordinance. He held up a thick stack of paper that includes all the calls from each hotel to police going back to 2017. He said the Fire Dept. is also going in blind. He said the ordinance needs to be tightened up to protect the city's public safety personnel. Councilor Mercer-Bruen asked if the revised ordinance addressed how many times public safety has to respond before the

innkeepers license is revoked. Chief Rufo said there is no specific number. He said the primary rationale for the change to the ordinance is so police can have access to video surveillance. He said if the ordinance is changed, the hotels will have to provide access to video. He said he and Capt. Murphy met with Ms. Sherry Foster from Extended Stay and the meeting with her was productive. He said Ms. Foster is very proactive. He said Extended Stay has been one of the city's most troublesome hotels and access to video will help police with the investigative process. Councilor Mercer-Bruen asked what it would take for an innkeepers license to be revoked. Chief Rufo said it is not the police department's intent to revoke licenses. He said the intent is to have a more cooperative environment. Councilor Mercer-Bruen asked if some hotels in the city are not asking for identification from their guests. Chief Rufo said some are and some are not. Capt. Murphy said the ordinance will serve as a guide for best practices. Councilor Mercer-Bruen said she wants to make sure the council is adopting something with teeth. Capt. Murphy said the police department wants to implement the carrot and stick approach. He said the License Commission did suspend a hotel's license several years ago. He said there were problems with Red Roof Inn recently and the new management installed more and better surveillance cameras, and became more cooperative. He said there are some great hotels in the city, and they have been encouraged to share best practices with each other. He said the ordinance change is a memorialization of those best practices. Councilor Mercer-Bruen asked if there is anything in the ordinance that requires the hotels to ask for identification. Chairman Skeffington said identification should be required, so police have an idea of who they are dealing with. He said it is not fair to police to walk into a situation without knowing who is involved. Councilor Gately asked if some of the issues at the hotels involve alcohol consumption at function halls. Capt. Murphy said the two hotels that produced the most calls in the survey he provided to the License Commission do not have liquor licenses. Councilor Gately asked why there have been so many recent incidents at the hotels. Capt. Murphy said Covid was a factor. He said Covid exacerbated a lot of problems. Councilor Demers said the state has subsidized housing at hotels. Capt. Murphy said there are more long-term stays that are being paid for by money from the federal government. Councilor Gately said he agrees with the idea that police should know what they're dealing with when they respond to a call. Chief Rufo said the biggest thing is access to video. Capt. Murphy said the issue at Extended Stay occurred on a Saturday night. He said the requirement of a search warrant would have been difficult to access the video because they would have had to get the warrant from a judge. Councilor Gately asked if the ordinance change has been vetted by the City Solicitor. Capt. Murphy said the City Solicitor authored the changes. Motion made by Councilor DiMambro and seconded by Councilor Ferullo to allow any member of the City Council not on the committee to address the proposed ordinance change; approved, 5-0. Councilor Dillon said the council really needs to take a look at the ordinance and make changes that are supportive of the police and fire departments. He said when there are that many calls, the council has an obligation to give police the tools they need to conduct a proper investigation. He said there are so many reasons to amend the ordinance. He said it is a mystery how some hotels can make only one or two calls and others make 50 calls. He said changing the ordinance will make things safer for public safety personnel. He said the City Council needs to support these changes to the ordinance. Chief Rufo said as presented, the ordinance only addresses surveillance of common areas. He said if the ordinance is followed, it is going to help police. President Concannon said he supports the changes to the ordinance. He said this is a step in the right direction. He said ordinarily the process would start with the council asking the City Solicitor to render an opinion but she has already been involved in the

process thanks to input from the Police Dept. and the License Commission. He said his sense is a number of calls to police have to do with the language in the ordinance that is being changed. Chief Rufo said Extended Stay has taken other steps to deter criminal activity. He said Extended Stay has installed signage to reserve parking spots for police. President Concannon said he thinks that will help. Councilor Gately asked if Woburn Police have contacted any other police departments. Capt. Murphy said Woburn Police have been basically looking at what they have been doing. He said Woburn is a little ahead of the curve when it comes to policing hotels. Councilor Gately said he is all for the ordinance changes. Councilor Viola asked how the fine system will be handled. Chief Rufo said there is no fine schedule with the ordinance for calls to police, but any violation of the ordinance would result in a \$300 fine. He said the primary goal of the revisions to the ordinance is changing the culture. Councilor Viola asked where the money for the fines would go. Chief Rufo said he assumes any money from fines would go into the general fund. Councilor Gately said one of the problems is the frequency of changes in management. Capt. Murphy agreed there are some hotels that seem to have revolving management. Councilor Gately said the council wants to help the police. Chairman Demers asked if anyone else in the audience wished to address the committee. Gwen Lytle, Dual General Manager, Hampton Inn & Homewood Suites by Hilton Boston Woburn, 371 Washington St., Woburn, MA, said Hampton Inn/Homewood Suites have a few things going for them. She said they required identification. She said their lodging is priced higher than some of the other hotels in the city. She said she has been the general manager since 2019. She said she has a great relationship with police. She said there is some ambiguity with surveillance. She said there are cameras in the building but not the parking lot. She said their corporate office does not permit cameras in the pool area. She said there is ambiguity between liability and being a good corporate partner. She said she had a state trooper come in one night at 8 p.m. and ask for access to files. She said she also has a responsibility to protect her guests as well. She said there was a Supreme Court case in 2015 about sharing personal information. She said she does not take down driver's license numbers. She said she wants to make sure the ordinance is written with the best interests of everyone in mind. She said room rates in November dropped lower than \$100. She said a rate that low is going to tend to bring a different type of clientele. She said she wants to make sure the ordinance is written in such a way that it doesn't put people in a sticky situation. President Concannon said he expects the City Solicitor took a lot of those concerns into consideration when she reviewed the ordinance. Ms. Lytle said she just wants to make sure the ordinance jibes with the 2015 Supreme Court case. Councilor Mercer-Bruen asked Ms. Lytle if she can send a copy of the Supreme Court decision to the council. Ms. Lytle answered affirmatively. Motion made by Councilor DiMambro and seconded by Councilor Mercer-Bruen that the order "ought to pass," approved, 5-0.

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MOTION made by Councilor Mercer-Bruen and seconded by Councilor DiMambro to adjourn; in favor, 5-0. Chairman Demers adjourned the meeting at 6:36 p.m.

A TRUE RECORD ATTEST

Gordon Vincent
Clerk of Committees

